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FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [PREL](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: STUDENTS PROTEST PROPOSED UNIVERSITY REFORMS, SHUT
DOWN ATHENS CENTER

ATHENS 00001508 001.2 OF 002

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Following over a month of sit-ins, strikes, and protest rallies opposing GoG plans to reform the Greek university system -- especially allowing private, non-profit universities to operate -- left-wing and communist student groups and some university professors on June 8 organized a 10,000-strong demonstration. The central Athens march all but stopped transportation in the city. When the march turned violent, police responded with tear gas and detained forty persons, 4-5 of whom remain under arrest. The GoG has stood firm (thus far) in its plans to go ahead with the reforms, despite calls for Education Minister Yiannakou's resignation from a representative of the left-oriented professors' union, which claims she did not adequately consult with them, students or parents. Opposition PASOK leader Papandreou was less resolute, initially supporting the education reforms, then backpedaling in the face of protests from PASOK's own student organization. He is now calling for the reforms to be delayed. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) University students and university teaching staff held a 10,000-strong demonstration in central Athens June 8 to express opposition to government's intention to pass comprehensive university education reforms. Anarchists and various leftists groups used the opportunity to attack banks, stores, cars, and a major hotel. Police, well accustomed to large Athens demonstrations, used tear gas and detained 40 persons - Greek police told us that four to five demonstrators would be prosecuted. Ten policemen and four civilians were injured. The demonstrations nearly paralyzed public transportation and vehicular traffic through the center of Athens. A smaller, follow-on student demonstration took place on June 9 and another is planned for June 15.

13. (U) The education reforms, the text of which has not yet been released or officially presented to Parliament, are said to touch upon such important issues as: university asylum (which prevents police from entering university campuses without permission and therefore creates havens for criminals); eliminating "lifelong students" by capping years of study; re-evaluating professors' teaching obligations and promotion to tenured faculty positions; and deregulating university education to allow and recognize private, non-profit universities in Greece. Currently, Greece only recognizes degrees from free, public Greek universities where placement is based on a nationwide entrance exam. While many of the proposed reforms would take immediate effect, the establishment and recognition of non-profit, private universities would require a Constitutional amendment that would not be ratified until the next Parliament meets. Many who oppose the amendments have focused on what they call the

"commercialization" of the public university education or "surrender of public universities to private interests." They argue that introducing non-profit institutions would remove the egalitarianism of the Greek university system, higher salaries at private schools would attract professors and administrators away from the public university system, and unqualified, rich students would be able to "buy" their way in to private schools.

¶4. (U) In actuality, such reforms are desperately needed. The asylum policy, a holdover from post-junta leftist ideology, forbids police from entering campuses for any reason. In effect, anarchists, not students, regularly use university campuses to launch Molotov cocktails from or to hide in after attacks in the city. Facilities are poorly maintained; one Athens professor told poloff he finally paid a student from his pocket to repair long-broken light fixtures in his dark lecture hall. If there were competition for students, he hoped that the state might take more seriously maintaining and protecting its facilities.

¶5. (U) The current recognition in Greece of only public university degrees means that public university graduates have a monopoly on seats in graduate programs and highly sought-after civil service jobs. Faced with a revolution in the failing university system, students have predictably responded in a reactionary way, seeking to preserve a privileged position from the risks of competition. Moreover, Greek students fear that non-profit private schools, after attracting the best professors, would quickly be seen as having higher quality than state schools; that the students' public school degrees will be seen as "useless;" and that private sector companies would then prefer to hire graduates of private institutions. What seemed to have started as a leftist movement that was holding other students' academic progress hostage appears to have gained traction among a wider grouping of students, as witnessed by the massive

ATHENS 00001508 002.2 OF 002

10,000-strong demonstration in Athens on June 8.

¶6. (SBU) Most universities and technological institutes have been closed since mid-May by sit-ins and indefinite student and academic staff strikes over these proposed reforms. A professor told us that the lockdown has been so complete that lab animals at the Aristotelian University are dying--staff are sneaking on campus at 3 AM to feed those that remain alive. Education Minister Marietta Yiannakou has been criticized for not averting this reaction with better planning, and a representative of the professors' union has called for her resignation. Opposition PASOK leader George Papandreou, who supported these reforms in the past, has wavered in the face of PASOK's student organization and his own poor public opinion ratings, and is now against the reforms.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Many Greeks, especially professors, recognize that reforms to the university system are long overdue and sorely needed. We have long pushed for the GoG to recognize degrees from private institutions, which would, among other things, benefit private U.S. higher learning institutions already here. There are no signs that the government will back down, but now that Papandreou is questioning these reforms, their eventual passage in Parliament is less certain. And while protests of all varieties are frequent occurrences in Athens, the public is aggravated that student demonstrations keep turning the city center into a traffic quagmire. The fact that primarily left-wing and not politically mainstream students organized this protest suggests the issue has not yet reached a critical point. But as nearly all university students feel "threatened" by the introduction of the non-profit universities, the situation could turn more explosive.

COUNTRYMAN